# Exploring Competencies from Policy to Practice

Shilpi Banerjee*

**Abstract**

*This paper examines the evolution and implementation of competency-based education reforms in India, highlighting the gradual shift from traditional, content-heavy curricula to a more holistic and learner-centred approach. It analyses how clearly defined learning standards—namely Minimum Levels of Learning (MLLs), learning outcomes, and competencies—have been introduced through key policy documents such as the National Curriculum Frameworks (NCF), the Right to Education (RTE) Act, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The paper further outlines the defining characteristics of competencies, their implications for pedagogy and assessment, and their role in promoting equity, inclusivity, and meaningful learning. It concludes with strategic recommendations for strengthening implementation, including sustained teacher professional development, supportive infrastructure, and collaborative professional learning communities.*

**Keywords:** Competency-based Assessment, MLL, NEP 2020, NCF-SE 2023, Pedagogy, Assessment

## Context

Traditional curricula have largely prescribed content to be covered within a fixed timeframe, without clearly defining the knowledge, capacities, values, and dispositions that students were expected to demonstrate. In the absence of clearly articulated learning endpoints, such curricula often fail to distinguish between what was "essential to know" and what was merely "good to know." Consequently, curricula became overloaded and unwieldy. Teachers were frequently compelled to rush through content in order to "cover and finish" the syllabus, often without ensuring that students had achieved mastery or not.

* *Associate Professor*, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

Assessment practices within traditional systems were predominantly summative and infrequent. Such approaches provided limited feedback to either students or teachers, regarding areas of strength and weakness and offered little scope for making timely instructional adjustments if teaching–learning processes proved ineffective. Norm-referenced grading, which ranked students in relation to one another, generated minimal insight into individual learning progress. Moreover, it fostered an environment of competition and anxiety rather than encouraging collaboration and shared learning. As a result, traditional education systems and curricula were confronted with several systemic challenges.

In response to these challenges, the Indian education system has increasingly moved towards competency-based reforms aimed at enhancing educational quality and aligning learning with the demands of the twenty-first-century. Building on earlier policy and curriculum initiatives, the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS 2022) and the School Education Stage (NCF-SE 2023) articulate clear learning standards to guide policymakers, administrators, curriculum developers, teachers, parents, and students in understanding the intended educational outcomes. This paper seeks to offer a comprehensive overview of the competency-based reforms introduced in India and to examine the concept of learning standards, including their definitions, key characteristics, and implications for effective teaching and learning.

## A Spotlight on Competency-based Reforms in the Indian Educational System

Policymakers and educational administrators continually reflect upon and critically evaluate the quality of learning, seeking to identify the causes of low learning levels, and to explore strategies for improvement. These efforts are primarily framed in terms of both the educational outcomes and educational processes. For a majority of stakeholders, educational outcomes serve as key indicators of quality, reflected in students' attainment of desired learning goals. To support this, it is essential to establish clearly defined learning standards that articulate expectations for student achievement. Such standards ensure consistency in expectations for all learners while allowing flexibility for stakeholders to select appropriate materials and pedagogical approaches. In doing so, they promote equity, accommodate diversity, and foster teacher autonomy.

Equally significant is the second dimension of quality—the processes that enable the achievement of desired outcomes. These include pedagogy, classroom assessment practices, teaching–learning resources, teacher capacity-building initiatives, school accessibility, student retention and

dropout rates, transition and enrolment rates, infrastructure and facilities, pupil–teacher ratios, and the availability of qualified teachers. Together, these processes play a critical role in shaping the conditions for meaningful learning.

Over the past several years, Indian education policy has emphasised both outcome- and process-oriented dimensions of quality, with varying degrees of emphasis based on contextual and societal needs. There has been a sustained policy thrust towards competency-based reforms through the formulation of learning standards encompassing Minimum Learning Levels (MLLs), learning outcomes, and competencies, as illustrated in Fig. 1. This framework now serves as a foundational basis for assessing and improving the quality of education.

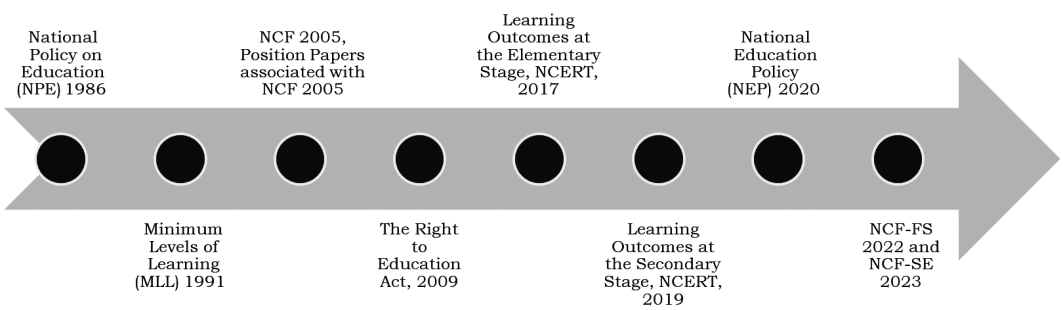


*Fig. 1: Competency-based Reforms in India*

In the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1968, quality in education was defined in terms of access and retention, with a focus on expanding educational facilities by providing schools in rural habitations. Consequently, schooling facilities were established in over 90 per cent of rural regions within a 1km radius. In the NPE of 1986, the emphasis shifted to the quality not only in terms of access but also in the conditions for success. The recommendation was to establish minimum levels of learning for each stage of schooling, introducing an additional dimension of learning standards to the concept of quality.

In the Plan of Action (PoA) of 1992, it was noted that the large-scale expansion had led to the establishment of educational facilities with widely varying quality, encompassing institutional infrastructure, teaching–learning processes, and the quality of students graduating from these institutions. The need to draft Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL) emerged from the fundamental principle that, regardless of caste, creed, location, or gender, all children should have access to education of a comparable standard. The primary objective behind the formulation of the MLL initiative was

to address issues of equity and reduce existing disparities in education. Two basic considerations kept in view while formulating the MLLs were: (i) the cognitive capabilities of the children at different classes or grades corresponding to different stage of development; and (ii) the empirical reality in terms of enabling environmental conditions that characterise the primary education programmes.

The Minimum Levels of Learning (MLLs) developed grade-wise and subject-wise for the primary stage in 1992 for language, maths, and EVS. These were presented as competencies, which were highly product-oriented, and had a limited scope for assessing the overall development of children, as shown in Box 1.

**Box 1**

**Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL)—** A few examples of Language and Oral expression—Grade 1

- Recite simple rhymes, poems, and songs in a group with gestures and actions.
- Repeat simple sentences correctly.
- Answer simple questions requiring yes/no, answers.
- Ask simple questions.

A significant conceptual shift occurred with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, which foregrounded the child's capacity to construct knowledge as a natural learner and placed this understanding at the centre of curriculum transaction. The teacher's role was re-envisioned, primarily, as that of a facilitator of learning rather than a transmitter of knowledge. Learning was viewed as emerging from the child's engagement with the world—through exploration, response, invention, and meaning-making. This marked a decisive move towards emphasising the process of learning rather than merely its outcomes. NCF 2005 and its associated position papers articulated both general and subject-specific aims of education, and provided stage and subject-wise recommendations on the features of quality curricula, assessment practices, and pedagogy.

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, operationalised education as a fundamental right, as enshrined in Article 21A of the Constitution of India. The Act mandates that every child is entitled to full-time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school that meets specified norms and standards. As a step towards defining these standards, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) published curricular expectations and learning outcomes for Grades 1 to 8 in 2017. Learning outcomes for the secondary stage were subsequently published in 2019, and draft learning outcomes have also been released for the higher secondary stage. A few examples are presented in Box 2.

**Box 2**

**NCERT Learning Outcomes**

A few examples of Language and Oral expression—Grade 1

- Recites poems/rhymes with actions.
- Responds orally (in any language including sign language) to comprehension questions related to stories/poems.

While the Minimum Levels of Learning (MLLs) primarily focused on the demonstrable and measurable skills, the formulation of learning outcomes reflected a more holistic approach by articulating the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that learners are expected to attain by the end of each grade. In the MLLs framework, non-cognitive domains, such as equality, cooperation, and a sense of responsibility were addressed in a more fragmented manner, whereas learning outcomes attempted a more integrated articulation of these dimensions.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions a paradigm of learning that integrates experiential pedagogy, formative assessments, and competency-based systems to enhance the quality of student learning (MHRD, 2020, p. 12, para 4.6). It further stipulates that all forms of assessment—both formative and summative—should be competency-based and aligned with clearly defined learning outcomes for specified grade levels (MHRD, 2020, p. 17, para 4.34).

The recently published *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) operationalises this vision by articulating stage-specific competencies for the Foundational, Preparatory, Middle, and Secondary Stages of Schooling. A few examples are presented in Box 3. These competencies represent learning achievements that are observable and can be assessed in a systematic manner. Derived from the broader curricular goals, they are expected to be attained by learners by the end of each educational stage.

**Box 3**

**NCF-SE Competencies**

A few examples of Oral expression—Preparatory Stage

- Converses fluently and meaningfully in different contexts.
- Summarises core ideas from material read out in class.
- Makes oral presentations (show and tell, short welcome notes, anchoring of small events, short speeches, class debates).

Teachers, in turn, are expected to define class-specific learning outcomes that function as interim markers of progress towards the attainment of these stage-wise competencies. These learning outcomes are contextualised according to the socio-cultural setting of learners, the availability of materials and resources, and the specific contingencies of the classroom environment.

## Considerations for Framing Competencies and their Implications for Pedagogy and Assessment

In the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), competencies are designed with carefully articulated considerations. An understanding of these considerations enables teachers to plan pedagogy and assessment practices that are aligned with prescribed learning standards. In this context, it becomes essential to closely examine the competencies associated with each subject and stage by engaging with key questions such as: What is the nature of stage-wise competencies? From where are these competencies derived? How can they be used to scaffold student learning? How should formative and summative assessments and pedagogical practices be designed in relation to these competencies? The following sections outline some of the key considerations underpinning the framing of competencies.

### Attainment of Competencies as a Pathway to Achieving the Aims of Education

Striking a balance between the educational benefits for the individual, the common good of society, and the demands of competitive economic growth, remains a complex challenge. In the presence of clearly articulated educational standards, the focus often shifts towards the forms of learning that are easily measurable. However, equal emphasis must be placed on the dimensions of learning that are not immediately or directly measurable, as these are crucial for realising the broader aims of education.

While competencies serve to translate abstract educational aims into more concrete and attainable indicators, it is essential that the interrelationship between competencies and the broader aims of education is clearly understood and consistently foregrounded across all educational processes. For instance, a topic such as the water cycle at the middle stage contributes not only to the development of students' observation and inferential skills, but also fosters awareness about the conservation and protection of water resources, the problem of water pollution, and its impact on human and environmental health.

Accordingly, pedagogy and assessment must be designed in ways that capture both dimensions—the development of scientific process skills as well as the learners' understanding of the interface between science and society. This necessitates the use of diverse pedagogical and assessment strategies—such as concept maps to represent the components of the water cycle; reflective journals in which students document water-related phenomena observed in their daily lives; hands-on experiments; model-building activities; and focused group discussions.

Such varied approaches enable a more comprehensive assessment of students' conceptual understanding, skills, and values.

## Competencies as Subject-specific Constructs

Each competency statement reflects the distinctive nature of its respective subject and encompasses subject-specific knowledge, capacities, values, and dispositions, as illustrated in Box 4. Recognising these attributes allows teachers to design instructional strategies that are closely aligned with the epistemological foundations and learning goals of each discipline.

**Box 4**

**Competency:** Appreciates similarities and differences across languages in a multilingual classroom and society.

- **Knowledge:** Knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, social and contemporary issues.
- **Capacities:** Creative expression, ability to switch and mix code, discourse analysis.
- **Values and Dispositions:** Appreciation of diversity, and sensitivity.

**Competency:** Explains cause and effect relationship between phenomenon, events, and their occurrences.

- **Knowledge:** Knowledge of events, phenomenon, dates, effects, impacts, change.
- **Capacities:** Relate cause and effect, critical thinking, decision making, enquiry.
- **Values and Dispositions:** Sensitivity towards environmental and societal issues.

For example, language education foregrounds communication, comprehension, and creative expression; mathematics emphasises problem-solving, logical reasoning, and abstraction; science fosters observation, inquiry, and scientific reasoning; and social sciences enable learners to interpret sources, analyse relationships of cause and effect, and understand social processes.

At the same time, a clear understanding of subject-specific competencies also supports the interdisciplinary pedagogical approaches. For instance, linking scientific observation with mathematical representation and analysis can help learners perceive meaningful connections across disciplines, thereby strengthening conceptual understanding, coherence of learning, and long-term retention.

## Competencies as Stage-specific Constructs

Distinct sets of competencies are defined for the four stages of schooling—Foundational, Preparatory, Middle, and Secondary—reflecting a carefully sequenced progression that aligns with the children's developmental trajectories, including physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and language development. These stage-wise definitions account for the appropriate levels of complexity and conceptual difficulty, recognising learning as a continuous and cumulative process rather than a set of isolated milestones.

Such progression allows learners to attain competencies at a pace and in a manner that is developmentally appropriate to their needs and readiness. An illustrative example is presented in Fig. 2.

When teachers develop a clear understanding of this vertical progression of competencies, they are better positioned to plan, stage appropriate pedagogy and assessment, and to prepare learners effectively for subsequent levels of learning. For example, a mathematics teacher who recognises this progression will ensure that students achieve fluency in basic operations—addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division in the early grades, before introducing more complex ideas such as fractions and decimals, and eventually advancing to algebraic expressions and equations. Targeted instructional strategies and assessments can then be designed to strengthen foundational understanding at each stage while simultaneously building learners' confidence as they move towards higher-order of mathematical concepts. Ultimately, such an approach contributes to sustained and coherent development of students' overall mathematical proficiency.

## Competencies as Instruments of Equality and Equity in Education

Competencies serve as critical instruments for ensuring both equality and equity in education. Equality asserts that every student should have equal access to high-quality education, irrespective of background, and that the

| Preparatory Stage | Middle Stage | Secondary Stage |
|---|---|---|
| • Writes clear and coherent paragraphs that convey their understanding of a given topic/concept or on a reading of a text. | • Writes different kinds of letters, essays, and reports using appropriate style and registers for different audiences and purposes.<br>• Writes prose, poetry, and drama using appropriate style and language. | • Writes in different styles (narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive) from their own experiences and experiences of others.<br>• Writes for real-life situations (invitations, speeches, condolence messages, notices, creative slogans, advertisements) and for school newsletters/ magazines/journals. |

*Fig. 2: Competencies related to Writing Skills for Preparatory, Middle, and Secondary Stages*

same set of competencies should apply to all learners regardless of their circumstances, abilities, or prior experiences.

Equity, however, recognises that different learners require different kinds and levels of support in order to achieve the same competencies as their peers. While equality focuses on what is fair for the group, equity emphasises what is fair for the individual learner. For instance, for a given competency statement (as illustrated in Box 5), a teacher may choose reading passages of varying levels of complexity depending on students' prerequisite knowledge, linguistic background, and current levels of learning. Such differentiated pedagogical choices ensure that all learners are supported meaningfully in progressing towards the same competency benchmarks.

**Box 5**

**Competency:** Analyses and appreciates a point of view or cultural experience as reflected in the text; presents orally or in writing.

**Passage 1:** India's agriculture sector, while being a critical source of livelihood for a large part of the population, faces numerous challenges such as declining soil fertility, water scarcity, and increasing demand for food. The sector is further complicated by issues such as land ownership rights, fragmented markets, and limited access to credit and technology. The Indian government has implemented various policies and programmes aimed at addressing these challenges, however their impact has been limited due to factors such as inadequate infrastructure, and lack of effective implementation. To ensure food security and improve the lives of farmers, it is crucial that these challenges are addressed through a combination of government intervention, private sector engagement, and community involvement.

**Passage 2:** The Taj Mahal is an iconic mausoleum located in Agra, India. It was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal and is considered one of the finest examples of Mughal architecture. The Taj Mahal is made of white marble and is decorated with intricate carvings and inlaid precious stones. Every year, millions of visitors come from all over the world to admire its beauty and grandeur. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, and remains one of India's most popular tourist destinations.

## Competencies are Defined in a Manner that they are Observable and Assessable

All the Competency statements are expressed in terms of skill to be demonstrated and content to be acquired by the students. Each statement consists of a verb and a noun. The verb describes the measurable and observable cognitive skill, and the noun describes the content as shown in Fig. 3.

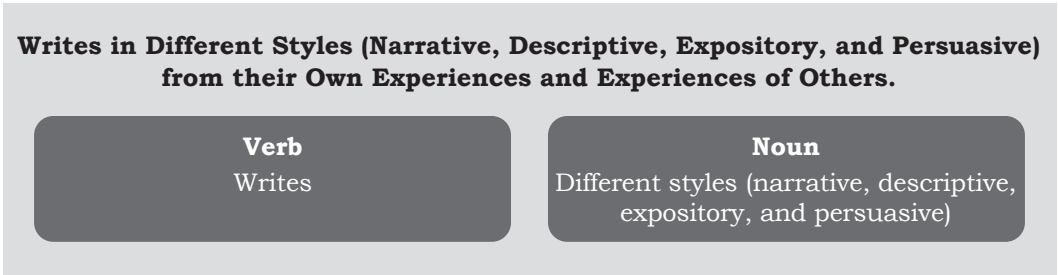


*Fig. 3: Structure of Competency Statements*

Along with cognitive skills and content knowledge, every competency statement also incorporates elements of values and dispositions. For instance, in the competency illustrated in Fig. 3, phrases such as, "own experiences and experiences of others" reflect these affective and ethical dimensions of learning.

When assessing such competencies, it is therefore essential to employ a variety of assessment techniques in order to capture students' learning in a holistic manner. For example, if the skill of writing is being assessed, decisions about a student's attainment of the competency should not be based on a single assessment task—such as, writing a persuasive essay alone. Instead, it is crucial to examine whether learners are able to reflect on their learning, collaborate, and brainstorm during the writing process, and demonstrate an understanding of the structural components of a written text, including characters, events, and narrative flow.

Similarly, writing competency can be assessed through multiple indicators such as students' ability to summarise complex texts, critically examine an author's point of view, construct and articulate their own perspective, express ideas through a coherent and logical sequence, organise writing with a clear beginning, middle, and end, and use grammatically correct and contextually appropriate language. Such multidimensional assessment enables a deeper and more authentic understanding of students' writing abilities.

## Competencies as Enablers of Valid, Reliable, and Fair Assessment

Competencies provide a strong foundation for the design of valid, reliable, and fair assessments. Validity is strengthened when assessments are explicitly aligned with clearly defined competencies. Since the attainment of a competency is understood as a progression, assessment practices must capture different stages of students' movement along this learning continuum.

For example, when assessing a competency related to oral expression,

teachers can determine whether students are able to articulate ideas verbally, construct meaningful sentences, and relate their thoughts to personal experiences. Reliability is enhanced through the collection of multiple pieces of evidence across contexts and tasks. For instance, when assessing a competency focused on describing the interdependence among animals, plants, and human beings, teachers may use a combination of methods such as group discussions, role plays, worksheets, and project work. The evidence gathered from these different assessment modes can then be triangulated to arrive at a robust and consistent judgement of student learning.

Fairness constitutes another essential dimension of the competency-based assessment. Students should have clarity regarding their starting point, their current position in the learning progression, the next steps in their learning journey, and the criteria by which their performance will be evaluated. To support this, teachers can actively guide students in unpacking competency statements, familiarise them with assessment rubrics, and eliminate ambiguity around expectations. Such transparency promotes students' ownership of learning and strengthens their sense of responsibility and agency.

## Conclusion

This paper underscores the significance of competency-based reforms as a means of enhancing the overall quality of education in India. By ensuring that, teaching–learning processes, curricular content, and assessment practices, are coherently aligned with clearly articulated competencies, the broader aims of education can be more effectively realised.

For the successful implementation of competency-based education, several strategic measures are essential.

- Teachers must ensure that classroom pedagogy, teaching–learning materials, resources, formative and summative assessments, and the reporting of student learning levels are systematically aligned with prescribed competencies. Such alignment fosters coherence across the educational experience and supports students in attaining defined learning standards.
- Administrative structures must provide sustained institutional support in the form of professional development opportunities, access to quality instructional materials, supportive learning environments, and enabling frameworks for implementing competency-based reforms. Investing in the professional growth of teachers ensures that they are well-prepared to plan instruction and assessment aligned with competency standards.
- The establishment of collaborative peer-learning communities among

teachers is critical. Such platforms enable educators to share classroom experiences, address implementation challenges, exchange resources, and collectively deepen their understanding of competency-based education.

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